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'Ali 'Abd al-Latif wa thawrat 1924: bahth fi masadir al-thawra alsudaniyya

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (1996). 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif wa thawrat 1924: bahth fi masadir al-thawra alsudaniyya. *Sudanic Africa*, 7 185-187. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/15

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At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with Princeton University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

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°Alī °Abd al-Latīf wa-thawrat 1924: baḥṭh fī maṣādir al-thawra al-Sūdāniyya by Yūshīkū Kūrītā [Yoshiko Kurita] (trans. Majdī al-Na°īm, introduced by Muḥammad Sa°īd al-Qaddāl), Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyya 1997, 118 pp.

°Alī °Abd al-Latīf (c. 1892-1948) was a unique figure in the annals of modern Sudanese history. Born in Wadi Halfa (near the Egyptian border) to ex-slave parents of Nuba and Dinka background, he fashioned a successful career in the Egyptian Army and organized a clandestine society known as the White Flag League. This group attracted a popular base of support made up of artisans, merchants, soldiers, and petty bureaucrats alike. In 1924, the White Flag League led a series of demonstrations and mutinies that challenged the British colonial presence and affirmed Sudanese connections with Egypt. Notwithstanding his central role in these activities of incipient nationalism, °Alī °Abd al-Latīf fell to the margins in the chronicles of Sudanese history, even before his death in a Cairo prison-cum-mental-hospital, where he had been consigned years before on dubious grounds.

This volume by Yoshiko Kurita of the University of Chiba in Japan restores °Alī °Abd al-Latīf and his movement to the centrality they deserve. Four essays, originally written in English and presented at scholarly conferences between 1986 and 1995, constitute the core of the book. The titles of the essays are (in English) ‘The Concept of Nationalism in the White Flag League’; ‘The Role of the “Detribalized Blacks” in the History of the Modern Sudan’; ‘The Biography of °Alī °Abd al-Latīf’; and ‘The Language of Class and the Language of Race in Modern Sudanese Politics: The Case of °Alī °Abd al-Latīf and the Revolution

of 1924'. The author chose not to revise these essays in preparation for their Arabic translation and publication, explaining that any minor contradictions among them represent the evolution of her ideas and research. The volume also includes an introduction by the historian Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl, a select bibliography and indices, including a family tree of °Alī °Abd al-Latīf and photographs. The Sudanese Studies Centre in Cairo, a scholarly ground for the Sudanese immigrant and exile community in Egypt, sponsored the publication, while the Cairo-based Sudanese intellectual, Majdī al-Na'im, undertook its translation.

The calibre of this text is unquestionably high. Armed with an impressive command of colloquial Sudanese Arabic, Yoshiko Kurita interviewed relatives and descendants of °Alī °Abd al-Latīf and relied heavily on oral evidence. She also drew upon Arabic and English printed sources, and archival materials from the National Records Office in Khartoum, the Public Record Office in London, and the Sudan Archive in Durham, England. She adds to this study her deep understanding of the Sudan and its politics which comes from some years of residence in the country. The result is a text that is rich in content, interpretation, and nuance.

The reasons for Kurita's decision to publish her collected essays in Arabic are clear. More than many historians of the Sudan writing today, she conceives of her work as an ongoing dialogue with the people of the Northern Sudan. Nevertheless, she should try to prepare her essays for publication in English, to reach an audience of non-Arabic-readers which would include many Southern Sudanese.

The long-term significance of °Alī °Abd al-Latīf, as Yoshiko Kurita's essays show, lay not in his role as an anti-colonial agitator but in his promotion of a form of nationalism, or proto-nationalism, which transcended ethnic and class distinctions. In this ideological sense, and against the context of the highly status-conscious society of the riverain Northern Sudan, the man and his movement were 'revolu-

tionary'. In many ways, therefore, °Alī °Abd al-Laṭīf and the White Flag League stand as a history lesson for today's war-torn Sudan. °Alī °Abd al-Laṭīf himself symbolizes the possibility of a cultural hybrid between North and South, while his movement symbolizes the possibility for the political realization of ethnic diversity and equality within a unitary nation.

Heather J. Sharkey